

Why should you vote in this referendum?

Today, May 6th, our Student Government Association released a referendum giving the student body the opportunity to vote on divesting our endowment from any company that is involved in arms, arms manufacturing, or is profiting off war in any capacity. Students and the SGA put an immense amount of time and energy drafting this referendum and making it available as a means for us to make our voices heard. We want to encourage the student body to vote, drawing from your own beliefs and learnings, and to communicate your opinions to the college's administration and Board of Trustees in a meaningful way. **It is absolutely critical that each and every Middlebury student votes by midnight on Thursday, May 9.** Our intention is not to tell you how to vote. We recognize the myriad relationships Middlebury students have with Palestine and Israel. In the spirit of open and free expression, we would like to share why we will be voting "yes" on divestment. We can all recognize the distinct nature of the violence being perpetrated against the people of Palestine and the suffering it brings to civilians on both sides.

"We not only inspire our undergraduates to grapple with challenging questions about themselves and the world," states Middlebury's mission statement, "but we also foster the inquiry, equity, and agency necessary for them to practice ethical citizenship at home and far beyond our Vermont campus." As students, we have an opportunity and the responsibility to practice ethical citizenship by voting in this referendum. This privilege is not shared by students at the majority of American universities, where any sort of public dialogue surrounding this contentious issue has recently been prevented or restricted.

In a BBC article from this past February, journalists wrote that, "In December, [the IDF] described an assessment that it was killing two civilians for every Hamas fighter as 'tremendously positive,' given the challenges it faced on the battlefield."¹ Regardless of what those alleged challenges were, to describe a civilian-militant casualty rate of 2:1 as "tremendously positive" is unconscionable. That members of the IDF think this way and proudly declare these dehumanizing sentiments publicly is key to understanding the systemic nature and objectives of the ongoing violence. We as the authors of this piece are not alone in stating that the actions of the Israeli government go beyond what is acceptable during war. "In their stated intent to use all means to destroy Hamas," says Agnès Callamard, Amnesty International's Secretary General, "Israeli forces have shown a shocking disregard for civilian lives. They have pulverized street after street of residential buildings killing civilians on a mass scale and destroying essential infrastructure, while new restrictions mean Gaza is fast running out of water, medicine, fuel and electricity..."² We believe the best way to push for an end to the unnecessary killing of Palestinians and Israelis alike is by pressuring our institution to guarantee that they will

¹ "Israel Gaza: Checking Israel's claim to have killed 10,000 Hamas fighters," *BBC*, February 29, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68387864>.

² "Damning evidence of war crimes as Israeli attacks wipe out entire families in Gaza," *Amnesty International*, October 20, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-as-israeli-attacks-wipe-out-entire-families-in-gaza/>.

not ever invest in war profiteering or benefit in any way from the activities of businesses profiting off of this violence.

Students have power. Domestically and globally, people are paying an exceptional amount of attention to American colleges, regardless of whether we deserve it. According to Professor Marsicano at Davidson College, “Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has already mentioned student protests at American universities publicly.”³ Middlebury’s actions matter, particularly as an elite and wealthy institution, and we have the ability to set precedents for other schools to follow.

As of June 2023, our endowment was \$1.47 billion. Money is power, and voting in this referendum is imperative to returning a measure of this power to Middlebury students. Currently, the college can invest its \$1.47 billion endowment in companies that profit off the violence in Palestine, Israel, and the world as a whole at its discretion. We believe that abstaining from voting or voting against this point expresses a tacit acceptance of our school’s ability to make money off of the deaths of human beings. By voting in this referendum, you can show Middlebury that we all deserve to have a say in how they fund our lives here.

Past SGA referendums have had tangible effects on the college’s use of the endowment. Although the administration initially rejected students’ push for fossil fuel divestment in 2013, “citing difficulty and material cost of withdrawing from a complex portfolio of investments, and the uncertainties and risks that divestment would create,” student voices would prove instrumental in changing this decision.⁴ In 2018, 70% of students turned out for the referendum on fossil fuel divestment, with 80% in favor.⁵ The impact of this result cannot be overstated ; in 2019, after 6 years of student action, the Board of Trustees voted to divest and introduced the current Energy 2028 plan.⁶ Energy 2028 proves the student body has the power to influence where our \$1.47 billion dollar endowment goes.

We chose to attend this institution because our values align with Middlebury’s mission statement. What does it say about us if we do not take this opportunity to exercise our civic responsibility and make our voices heard through this referendum? On our campus, it is easy to get caught up in school and life and forget that we are inextricably connected to the broader world and have a responsibility to engage with it. Today’s referendum is an opportunity for us all to recognize that connection and vote with our whole hearts, however we choose to vote. As such, it is absolutely vital that you as students vote by Wednesday, May 8.

³ “‘Divest from Israel’: Decoding the Gaza protest call shaking US campuses,” *Al-Jazeera*, April 30, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/30/divest-from-israel-breaking-down-the-us-student-protesters-demands/>.

⁴ Kelsey Collins, “The Many Faces of Divestment,” *Middlebury Campus*, September 18, 2023, <https://www.middleburycampus.com/article/2013/09/the-many-faces-of-divestment>.

⁵ Cora Kircher, Leif Taranta, And Lucy Weiss, “We Demand Justice: Divest Shows Student Power,” *Middlebury Campus*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.middleburycampus.com/article/2018/10/we-demand-justice-divest-shows-student-power>.

⁶ Sabine Poux and James Finn, “Middlebury Moves to Divest as Part of New Energy2028 Plan,” *Middlebury Campus*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.middleburycampus.com/article/2019/02/middlebury-moves-to-divest-as-part-of-new-energy2028-plan>.